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Farmers honored for cleaning up Yakima River

YAKIMA - Farmers and irrigators throughout the Yakima Valley today received the state's highest environmental award for their success in helping clean up the polluted waters of the lower Yakima River.

Department of Ecology Director Linda Hoffman and Bill Alkire, government affairs director for Gov. Gary Locke, presented Environmental Excellence Awards to six organizations that were instrumental in supporting farmers in their efforts.

The award recipients are North Yakima Conservation District, South Yakima Conservation District, Benton Conservation District, Roza Irrigation District, Sunnyside Valley Irrigation District and Washington State University Agricultural Research Station at Prosser.

"Thanks to their extraordinary efforts, the farmers of the Yakima Valley have helped improve the river's water quality by about 80 percent," said Hoffman. "Initially, many were wary of the lofty goals we had set for the Yakima River, but they accepted the challenge and demonstrated amazing leadership in cleaning up the river."

The Environmental Excellence Award is the state's highest award for recognizing environmental stewardship. The department issues the award to individuals, businesses and organizations that have shown leadership, innovation or extraordinary service in protecting, improving or cleaning up the environment.

The Yakima farming community has voluntarily embraced a rigorous plan to reduce the amount of sediment and pesticides entering the Yakima River by employing new irrigation practices and implementing new farming techniques.

Farmers are well on their way to achieving a series of water-quality goals set for 2017.

"The key has been that farmers have voluntarily taken on this challenge," said Jim Trull, manager of the Sunnyside Valley Irrigation District, which together with the Roza Irrigation District in 1998 decided to tackle water quality concerns along the Yakima River.

"Hop growers, vineyard owners, orchardists and row-crop farmers have all been united," he said. "It's a real testament to the leadership of the boards of directors and the cumulative efforts of individual farmers."

In 1995, some 253 tons of sediment per day dumped into the river from four targeted drains. Sampling during the 2003 irrigation season has shown just 47 tons of sediment per day left farmlands through these drains.

Over the years, millions of tons of sediment carrying residual pesticides dumped into the river from irrigation return flows. Not only were farmers losing valuable topsoil, the muddy water interfered with fish migration and spawning, and endangered important fish habitat.

In addition, some of the highest levels of DDT in the United States were found in fish tissue samples from the Yakima River. These factors contributed to the river's failure to meet water-quality standards, prompting the development of a water cleanup plan, as required under the federal Clean Water Act.

Since new farming methods have been put into practice under the umbrella of a water cleanup plan, the

watershed has seen marked improvements. For example:

- Moxee Drain in 1995 averaged 37 tons of sediment per day; in 2003, averaged 11 tons per day.
- Sulphur Creek drain in 1995 averaged 110 tons of sediment per day; in 2003, averaged 17 tons per day
- Granger Drain in 1995 averaged 60 tons of sediment per day; in 2003, averaged 13 tons per day
- Spring Creek/Snipes Creek in 1995 averaged 46 tons per day; in 2003, averaged 6 tons per day

Tom Tebb, a water-quality manager for Ecology, noted that more water quality improvement work is planned for the entire Yakima River watershed.

"The lower Yakima agricultural community has led the way," he said. "We hope the success resulting from these partnerships will extend throughout the river basin."

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Water cleanup-plan Web site: <http://www.ecy.wa.gov/programs/wq/tmdl/index.html>



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